TRANSCRIPT— RITA LEE BROWN

Interviewee: Rita Annette Lee Brown

Interviewer: Zoe Rhine

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Zoe Rhine: This is Zoe Rhine. I'm a librarian in the North Carolina Room, Pack Memorial Library. Today is August 10th, Friday, 2018, and I'm talking here at Pack Library with Rita Lee Brown. So, Rita, if you could just first repeat your name and say both your parents' names and both your grandparents' names, including women's maiden names, if you can, for the record.

Rita Brown: My name is Rita Annette Lee Brown. I am the daughter of Walter Smith Lee, Jr. and Annette Ballard Lee. I am the granddaughter of Walter Smith Lee, Sr. and Rita Hendrick Lee.

ZR: Okay. And you have grandparents on the other side?

RB: I do. I am also the granddaughter of Walter Ballard, Sr. and of Edna James Ballard. The Ballards were from Toledo, Ohio.

ZR: Okay. And did Annette's parents come to Asheville or she came without them?

RB: [??]

ZR: From Toledo, you said?

RB: Toledo, Ohio. My parents met in Eastern Germany, at the end of World War II.

ZR: Okay. Wow. And that's where you were born?

RB: Uh-huh. My mother was a Red Cross nurse and my father was a First Lieutenant when he met her.

ZR: Okay. And could you tell me if your grandfather, Walter Smith, and Hester met in Asheville?

RB: I am assuming. I don't know for sure. I'm assuming they probably met at Livingstone.

ZR: Okay. College?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: I just saw where she was from Salisbury? Is that right?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: So, I don't know anything about their marriage dates. Would they have been married, do you think, when they came here? Or we don't know.

RB: I don't know.

ZR: Okay. I'll let you know if I find anything.

RB: Okay. All right.

ZR: I think I talked about this with you at the Stephens Lee reunion this year. But I have sent two emails to Livingston [sic] College to try to find out if your--if Hester Lee was in the first graduating class, and I just can't get anybody to respond, so I'll keep trying.

RB: There is a plaque inside of Berry Temple Church. And I think I still have it on my phone because someone sent it to me. It doesn't have a year on it, but apparently in the original church, they were members of that church.

ZR: Is that Mt. Zion?

RB: No. Berry Temple.

ZR: Berry Temple. Sorry.

RB: Berry Temple Methodist Church. And they lived on 227 College Street, because that's where they lived--that's where he lived when my grandmother married.

ZR: Okay.

RB: He changed churches after she passed.

ZR: Do you mind if we start talking about them first?

RB: No. I don't know a lot about her. I know a lot about him.

ZR: Okay. She died first.

RB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's how my grandmother came to marry him, because he was a widow.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And my father told me this part. My grandmother would never have taught it. He was in his fifties and all the old church ladies were after him. And my grandmother was a young teacher, right out of school. And that's the one he chose. And my great-grandfather thought he was too old for her. And he did not approve of this.

I should have worn the locket. My grandfather wasn't sure she would accept his proposal, so he drove her down by Beaver Lake and instead of an engagement ring he had a locket, because he didn't want to put the money out in case she said no. But she agreed, and so he gave her the locket. I have the locket.

ZR: Did she ever get a ring?

RB: She did. She got a nice one, too. But because my great-grandfather didn't approve of it, they eloped and went to Cleveland where my older sister was and got married there.

Irene Hendrick's son, Rob Hendrick, grew up in the house with his grandfather and my grandmother, who was like 7 years or 8 years older than he was. And she always took care of him. And I asked, I said, “You mean you took him on your honeymoon?" She said, “Well, I couldn't leave him.” So he went with them and that still didn't satisfy my great-grandfather. And when they came back he said he didn't believe it was legal. So they had to get married all over again in front of him. Otherwise, he felt like his daughter had been disgraced. So they got married twice.

ZR: Well, that's a good story. So Hester died in 1922.

RB: Okay.

ZR: And do I know when Walter died?

RB: Yes. 1934. December 18th.

ZR: Do you mind if I ask how old you are, just so I--

RB: Me? 70.

ZR: You're 70, so you were born in--

RB: 1948.

ZR: Okay. Okay. That helps. I won't ask you how many times you were at their house.

RB: Well, you can. Because, when my grandfather married my grandmother, he built her a beautiful house at 9 Furman Avenue. In fact, the tree in the backyard is still there. It's right in the edge of parking lot at Berry Temple Church.

ZR: Oh, wow.

RB: And I did live in that house. I lived in my daddy's old room but they tore the house down to put where you now go up to go down on the road. But I loved that house. It was just a nice old house. I loved it.

ZR: So that would have been the interstate through?

RB: No, the interstate goes under there. But this is--you know where, hat do they call it? Short College or whatever they call it.

Anyway, do you know where Hopkins Chapel Church is?

ZR: Yeah.

RB: Okay. And Allen?

ZR: Yeah.

RB: Okay. The street that's going up by there. That used to be the other end of Furman Avenue.

ZR: Oh, okay.

RB: The other end of Furman Avenue is still there. But it gets up to where 240 comes and stops. This goes up and joins with [??] Road.

ZR: Wow.

RB: So, yes, I did go to that house.

ZR: I have really had to educate myself because--

RB: She died in 1922.

ZR: Yeah.

RB: He didn't waste any time. Because they must have got married either '23 or '24 because Daddy was born in '25.

ZR: Wow. Really? They didn't.

RB: No, they didn't. Well, the poor old man, he probably felt like he didn't have much time left. That's with those teachers in Catholic Hill.

ZR: Well, her obituary, if I'm reading it right, is 35 years, would have put her coming to Asheville, Hester, about 1887, and that's when it said she started first at Mountain Street.

RB: Okay.

ZR: And I was just--this is just talk, I guess.

RB: Wait a minute. She came when?

ZR: It should have been about 1887, after Livingston [sic] College. Right after she graduated, she came here.

RB: He was born in 1967. He was principal of Catholic Hill when it burned down in 1917.

ZR: That doesn't--sometime during the--

RB: They rebuilt Stephens Lee in 1924. Okay. So he started there in 1910.

[Shuffling papers and both speaking.]

ZR: Because I have the 1910 census here and they're listed together.

RB: Okay. And she was 40. Okay.

ZR: And he's 44.

RB: He liked younger women.

ZR: That's 1900. And here they're in--

RB: Morristown. Okay. See, he was born in Sevierville.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Sevierville is right where Dollywood is.

ZR: Right. Okay.

RB: We went there. When Roots came out, I took my children to research where his parents were.

ZR: So I was just trying to get myself familiar with Mountain Street School, and the first time it shows up in newspaper coverage is 1890.

RB: Okay.

ZR: So I'm assuming that's when it started.

[Shuffling through papers.]

RB: There's another one that talks about how the school started, you know, when they wanted a school for black children. It started in a church, I believe, in the basement.

ZR: Uh-huh. I'd like to find more of that early stuff. You know of her.

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: This appears to be when Catholic Hill School first opened.

RB: Okay.

ZR: And as that name. I'm assuming it maybe would have been Mountain Street before and they built the new school...or not?

RB: I don't think so.

ZR: Okay. You think Mountain Street kept going?

RB: I think Mountain Street was in and of itself. Catholic Hill came about when they moved from having it wherever that church was.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And the new building. Because the population began to grow.

ZR: Well, what really impressed me about this article is that 1892, the first year of Catholic Hill School, they have hired, for the first time with Asheville City Schools, this Miss Love whose first name... I should be able to tell you [looking through papers] I don't have it right here. But I have her first name, but it said she was a recent graduate from the Normal Department at Howard University in Washington. And then she had been a graduate of the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Jews.

RB: No, that's Miss Burrell.

ZR: For Miss Burrell. That's the other one. They hired two new teachers that year. And so they had been very interested in how black teachers, especially obviously before integration, and were so well educated.

RB: Yeah, they had to go away.

ZR: And I can't find any bio on her. I don't know if she was from here or came here for the job.

RB: She may have come here for the job. I just remember this old, old lady. And we would have to, like, go see her like at Christmas time and then take her something. And I

was real little. She always used to smell like mothballs. There were several of them, but I remember a Miss Love.

ZR: Well, do you have any idea if--I mean, it looks like the same thing was going on at Catholic Hill that we all know so much about at Stephens Lee, that highly educated teachers were hired.

RB: Yeah. Granddaddy did that. He wanted all teachers to have a masters degree. And if they didn't have one, he would do whatever he could to enable them to get one. And he had a particular relationship with a Dr. Linden at Columbia. And he would send them there if they could get there. If not, wherever they had to go. But he wanted that kind of staff. He patterned his philosophy after, a lot of it after Booker T. Washington's philosophy. But he wanted to bring a high level of culture to the community, and he did.

ZR: Uh-huh. So Linden was at Teacher's College?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: Okay. I've seen articles where he came here, too, to graduations and spoke.

RB: He did. My grandmother studied under him, as well, getting her EDS from there. Because she got her masters at Howard. And before that, she and Aunt Irene went to Spellman.

ZR: Spellman?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: So you think most of that early emphasis came from him?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: Okay. And do you think the City--I'm afraid to ask this; it's probably a stupid question--

RB: No.

ZR: Do you think that Asheville City School Board had anything to do with--

RB: I don't know.

ZR: --during any of the pre-integration period?

RB: I really don't know. I know that the Vanderbilts were, they were very instrumental in establishing facilities in places like the YMI, for people who worked for them and their children. But I really, I don't have enough knowledge of what the school board was like at that time. I know my grandfather was very well respected, because of his, not only his educational background, but from everything I've learned about him. The way that he carried himself. There were, my grandmother used to say that he was walking down the street and there were African American men standing on the street, if they saw him coming, they would take a cigarette out and stamp it out.

ZR: [Laughing] Like he was a preacher.

RB: Well, it was just a level of respect for him, that you just didn't do that. The fact that the man smoked a pipe at home--

[Laughing]

RB: He didn't do it on the street, so I guess they didn't know. I say this now because I can appreciate it. But growing up--you figure I'm two generations down. But I can remember them preaching to me, my grandmother, my Aunt Irene, my uncle, her husband, when you go out the door, you representing this family. Everything you do, somebody is watching. You have a reputation to uphold. Everything you do can reflect back on everything we've worked for. That's tough for a kid.

ZR: Yeah.

RB: But I understand it now.

ZR: Were your parents likely to say the same thing?

RB: Lord, no.

ZR: See, I wonder. It was just that generation?

RB: My father, that was one reason why he would not come back here to live. Because he rebelled against it. “I'm going to be my own person.” But he learned to appreciate, just like I did, you know, before he passed. He did. Oh, he, growing up it was like--

And then my grandmother moved. When my grandfather died. When my grandfather got so sick that he could not go to Stephens Lee, he would send her in his place and tell her what to do. And that's when she decided she wanted to become a principal. And when he died, particularly in those days, for an African American woman, he left her so she would not have had to work. And she had this ten-year-old boy.

And she went to the superintendent and gold him, “I'm going to go and get my degree and when I come back I want you to get me a job.”

And the superintendent later told me, he said, “Sure we will.”

ZR: Who was that? Do you remember?

RB: That was-- I can't remember. But anyway, he said, “Of course we will.” And he said, she wasn't coming back. Said she was young, she had money, and she was good looking. You know, why would she do that.

ZR: And where did she go?

RB: And she went to Howard.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And then she went to Columbia.

ZR: Oh.

RB: And she came back. She said, “Here's my stuff. I'm ready for school.”

And they gave her the worst, what they considered to be the worst school in the city, which was Asheville [??]. And she turned it around in two years. So they sent her to the next worst, which was Hill Street. And they said, “She'll never last”--

ZR: As principal?

RB: Uh-huh. It's first grade through eighth. She'll have at least 800 children. They had not invented guidance counselors or assistant principals then. And she was there for 33 years. She outlasted all those people. And she was only five feet one.

I used to ask her, because in their bedroom they had--wonder where I get it from--there was a fireplace and there were bookshelves all the way up to the ceiling. And I remember when we, we moved back into the house. And there were twin beds in there. And I didn't understand that because they were married people. Why did they have twin beds? And she wouldn't talk about that part.

But I said, “That old man was so old. What did you all do for fun?"

ZR: [Laughing]

RB: And she said, “We would sit by that fireplace and we would read to each other.” And they loved Shakespeare and they went through all the plays. My grandmother's dissertation was on Geoffrey Chaucer. And she said they just had so much in common. And I used to ask her why she never remarried. And she said, “If you ever had the love of your life like that,” she said, “nothing else will ever do.” And she didn't.

But he was a scholarly--she was something. She made me--I wrote something when she passed, and I wrote it to help me get through it. And the minister used it as her eulogy. But a part of it was, I said in every little child I see, she'll be looking too.

But she had this thing in Hill Street, up on the wall, that said, “Every child has a gift. It's up to us to find it.” And she'd say, “Some bring the gift of music, so you need to tell him to play,” and all this stuff. And she taught me that. And in my career, for some reason,

and it's still happening, and I still don't understand it, because I wasn't a bad child. I was afraid not to be. Because they whipped in my family. They'd tear your butt up.

But I tend to be able to reach children that other people can't. And I say that because, not by any plan, last year I ended up teaching high school for all year. And I'm just a substitute teacher. I was supposed to go when I feel like it, and when I want to watch The View, I stay the heck at home.

But I found some kids that nobody was listening to. And whatever that is, I get from her.

ZR: You grew up seeing that.

RB: Yeah. I've been with her, on appointment, because the library used to be on Pack Square. I've been with her, because she didn't want to leave me at school, to get her kids out of jail. She'd call to the--the chief of police was Chief Sluder. And he would call her and say, “I've got two of your boys in here and they were stealing something.” She said, “Hold on. Don't scare them and I'll be there.” And she'd put me in the car and she told the chief, “Now, if you scare them, you'll never get your stuff back, because they won't tell me. But if you'll leave me alone, I'll get your stuff back and then you tell me what you're going to give them and blah, blah, blah.”

And I'd go with her when she went down there to the jail. I'm not going to the jail. Okay? Not today. No, thank you. But I've seen her do stuff like that. And I got that from her, but she had to get that from him, because her father--I mean, her mother had a fourth-grade education.

Now, her father studied horticulture at Hampton, which is how my family ended up going to Hampton. And he was sent from Hampton to the Biltmore Estate to help do the gardens.

ZR: Okay. I think I'm missing something, if you can help me here. We're talking about--

RB: We're talking about-- No. This is not Hester. Now, remember Hester is--okay. Put an arrow over here.

ZR: Okay.

RB: His father was Walter Smith Lee, Sr. Okay. His mother was Rita Hendrick Lee.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And Rita Hendrick Lee is Walter Lee's second wife.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Hester Ford Lee was his first wife.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And her brother--

ZR: Wait a minute. You said Rita Hendrick Lee.

RB: Uh-huh. Wait a minute. I'm getting ready to get you there. I'm here to help you.

ZR: [Laughing] Okay. I'm terrible as at ancestry, I hope you know. It should have gone there by now.

RB: No. Okay. Bring her down here.

ZR: Uh-huh.

RB: She is the daughter of Laura Summey Hendrick.

ZR: Daughter of... Sorry. Say it again.

RB: Laura Summey Hendrick and Pressley L. Hendrick.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And together--now she had seven children when she married him, already. Together they had two children.

ZR: Married, together they had two.

RB: The oldest was Robert McKinley Hendrick. You wonder who the president was at that time. And the youngest was Rita Alsie, A-l-s-i-e, Hendrick.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Irene Odessa Stewart married Robert McKinley Hendrick.

ZR: Who did?

RB: Irene Odessa Stewart married Robert McKinley Hendrick. That's why it's Mrs. R. M. Hendrick.

ZR: Irene Odessa Stewart married him. And that's why what?

RB: That's where you get Irene Hendrick from. That was her maiden name.

ZR: Odessa was a middle name.

RB: Uh-huh. And it's S-t-e-w-a-r-t.

ZR: -e-w-a-r-t. Irene Odessa-- Oh, boy. I can't even read that. Stewart married Robert McKinley Hendricks [sic], and that's Irene Hendricks [sic]. Lordy. I got it. Now I know where your name comes from.

RB: There you go. No, not only that, you know where my whole name comes from because my mother was a Smith.

ZR: Uh-huh. I'm sorry I was so slow on that.

RB: They met at Florida A&M University.

ZR: Let's see--

RB: He met her at Florida A&M.

ZR: Florida A&M.

RB: Uh-huh. [Whispering] Guess what else?

ZR: What?

RB: She was 15.

ZR: Oh. How did she get to Florida A&M at 15?

RB: Her daddy worked there.

ZR: Oh. [Laughing]

RB: So these two were the same age. And when he married her and brought her to Asheville, my great-grandmother was Laura Summey Hendrick, said to her son, Robert Hendrick, “Look at this pretty little Indian child. Come on here, Honey," and sent them both to Spellman.

ZR: Indian [Laughing].

RB: Well, she looked like it. She said her--what did she tell me? Her grandmother was a Choctaw? I think she said she was full-blooded Choctaw. Because she said she was so scared when she came because she was young and he had married her and bringing her. And she was afraid of what his mother would say. And they took--they didn't have a car. They took a horse and buggy to the railroad station to pick her up. And my uncle got on the bus--on the train to go get her because she was scared to get off. And she was scared to come out. And my great-grandmother said, “Let me go get this child.”

So she went on the train and when she saw her she said, “Oh, where did you find this pretty little Indian child?" She said, “Come on, Honey.” The girl went home with her.

ZR: Okay. So where were we before you had to start explaining about who was who?

RB: Let's see.

ZR: We were at-- You were talking about Rita Hendrick Lee and--

RB: Wait till I tell Laura the lady just died in 1922. Grandpa, good grief.

ZR: The story you were telling me about it, about her.

RB: Well, I told you about why she became a principal.

ZR: Oh, okay.

RB: And how she--why she wanted to be one. Because she was an English teacher and loved it.

ZR: Well, that's great to have her story. Now, I've got to figure out more about her.

RB: Well, when I go back home, I'll probably write some stuff down and send it to you.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Try to condense it down.

ZR: Well, my assumption, since your grandfather was so well educated, and I don't know much about it, but I have a friend who's trying to educate me, because he taught education, education at Southern Alabama.

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: And about how there was really a big social philosophical movement, Booker T. Washington and who's the other guy?

RB: George Washington Carver.

ZR: Yeah.

RB: Well, that was your way out of apartheid.

ZR: Well, and the idea was that if, if blacks can do the best they can and be as educated as they can, and they go back to their home, wherever, then that will help rise everybody up. It was education that would.

And from what I've heard, it seems like it worked because it was--at that point, because it was extremely community based and the families were heavily involved, as well as the churches. And that, you know, people were encouraged to become teachers. It probably was the one field that was open easily to blacks.

RB: It was. And, oh, boy, did I have to fight, because when I said I wanted to be a teacher, my father lost it. Because he said, “You can be anything. Used to be, that's all you could be. Why do you want to do that?"

And he fought me and fought me and fought me. But he lost that battle. But anyway.

ZR: Well, I can see, because he grew up with that, that--

RB: Yeah, he--well, he ended up he was an engineer. And he wanted to eventually go to law school. He wanted for me to go to law school. I didn't want to be a lawyer. But he wanted me to.

But when you look at, these are people who were denied the right to learn to read. I mean, it wasn't three generations back. And a lot of them, just like my great-grandmother, she finished the fourth grade. My grandmother never went to first grade. They didn't have kindergarten. My great-grandmother taught her at home. And she started school in second grade. But she was well enough to do it. I mean, she knew enough to do it.

ZR: Yeah.

RB: They just, the whole thing was on education, education, education.

ZR: Did your mother feel the same way as your father?

RB: My great--

ZR: Your mother.

RB: Where is it? [Looking at paper] Edna James Ballard was a teacher.

ZR: Oh.

RB: She was a teacher and he worked for the railroad, in Ohio. My mother absolutely felt the same way.

ZR: Okay.

RB: In fact, she had started at the University of Toledo, and she ran into a situation and she left the university and joined the Red Cross, with the intention of going back. And they sent her to Calcutta, India, for two years. And then they sent her to Germany. And the story that was told to me is, she went to the NCO Club and she was on the dance floor, and this young boy from Asheville, North Carolina, saw her and that was all she wrote.

ZR: [Laughing] Just that fast.

RB: Uh-huh. Too fast, actually. The telegrams start flying back and forth. My grandmother saved them. “I tried to tell her.”

ZR: Can I ask you where you--all the different schools you were at here?

RB: In Asheville?

ZR: Uh-huh.

RB: Sure.

ZR: Well, actually, I don't know how old you were when you came here.

RB: Oh, I was a baby.

ZR: From Germany

RB: Yeah, from Germany. Yeah, I was a year old when we came.

ZR: That's a baby.

RB: Yep. I went to Hill Street School, first grade through eighth.

ZR: Okay.

RB: I went to Allen High School, ninth and tenth grade. And I transferred to Stephens Lee in the eleventh grade. And then they closed it at the end of that year and I graduated from South French Broad High School in 1966.

ZR: So that was--do I remember '64 was the last graduating class?

RB: No, '65.

ZR: '65. So you were in eleventh grade in '65.

RB: Well, it started in '64. '64, '65.

ZR: Okay.

RB: And then my senior year was at South French Broad.

ZR: So that's where you graduated? What was that? To graduate from South French Broad, as opposed to Stephens Lee?

RB: We didn't like it. In fact, we voted to have on our diplomas it had Stephens Lee High School. Our class rings had South French Broad, but our diplomas all had Stephens Lee High School.

ZR: Did that happen?

RB: What?

ZR: They put it on your diplomas?

RB: Oh, yeah. On our diplomas, oh, yeah. All of them. And we've still got them. Yep. And we have T shirts. In fact, the reason I'm here this particular weekend, my high school class--we celebrate every five years. And this year, finally all of us have turned 70. So we're having a 70th birthday party tomorrow. The whole high school.

ZR: Tomorrow?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: At Stephens Lee?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: I think I was supposed to be there.

RB: Are you?

ZR: I thought it was the first Saturday in September.

RB: What is?

ZR: Well--

RB: The meeting?

ZR: Well, no. There was supposed to be a birthday party--

RB: Well, somebody else might be having one. But ours is tomorrow.

ZR: Okay. Well, I better check.

RB: That's why I'm here.

ZR: Can I ask you a few questions? What time is it? Can you go a little bit longer now?

RB: Yeah, what time is it?

ZR: Can we do this again? [Laughing] We haven't even gotten to you yet.

RB: I know. What time is it, anyway?

ZR: It's going on 4:00.

RB: Oh, I'm fine.

ZR: Well, let me just--I didn't realize--I did want to remember to ask you what year you graduated, or I would have known--can you tell me what condition you felt like the Stephens Lee building was in '64?

RB: Nothing that couldn't have been preserved.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Nothing that couldn't have been--if they could preserve the stupid gym. And there just weren't enough people to fight for it. And so many people regret it. And those of us who moved away chastise those who didn't, because you didn't work hard enough. I mean, I have a huge picture of it, Castle on the Hill. And nothing left but the gym?

ZR: Yeah. Well, that was an incredible architect that built it. And I have assumed that it could have been saved, but I ran across some articles in the paper where black students were actually saying it was in terrible shape.

RB: It might have been. But historically speaking? Now they're going to put the gym on the historic register? Please. You think the building could have been.

ZR: Well, it sounds like there were different possible things they were going to do with it and I've read the newspaper prior to when it was demolished, and there was no talk about it. I mean, it seemed to have happened overnight, where nobody knew it.

RB: It did. It did.

ZR: And I just can't help but feel that that was the same thing as urban renewal. I mean, it's just--

RB: What do they call it, eminent domain, when they just take stuff?

ZR: Well, you know, it's like where I went to high school, or where I went to any of my elementary or high schools. It was not a cultural center. And I think, basically, most whites don't--can't imagine a school being a cultural center.

RB: Well, it was.

ZR: But it was. And, you know, so it really seems to me like they had to have known that.

RB: They did.

ZR: And that it had to have been why--

RB: Who was in power, who was in office.

ZR: Yeah. Okay. I wish it could be put back.

RB: Oh, we all do. But the spirit is still there. I have to send you this article. I was going to send it to the alumni people, but I'll make a copy for you, too.

I came back to teach at South French Broad. And I ended up teach in my old homeroom. That was my classroom. And one of my teachers was still teaching there. And she dared me to call her “Miss"--I can't say her name, it's disparaging. “You'd better call me.” I said, “Miss Chandler, I can't.” And she ended up teaching one of my kids, but--

ZR: What year did you end up back at--

RB: I came back, let's see. I came back home in 1977 and I went back to teaching in 1978. And I went to South French Broad to teach in 1985.

ZR: Wow. So--

RB: Then I taught there until 1993, when I went into administration. But--

ZR: So from '78 to '85 you were at--

RB: I taught at Aycock and Newton, because I was an itinerant music teacher. And then I left teaching for five years and went to work for the State and I came back in 1985. Yeah.

ZR: Okay.

RB: But when I was at South French Broad, when we first went there, we being my class. We came over as seniors. We were still the Stephens Lee Bears. So we brought that with us. And on the gym there was this huge big bear, on the wall. And then they decided that everything was going to become the Cougars. So they were getting ready to paint over the bear and I happened to be there. So I sat there and I wrote this piece about the bear and the spirit he was taking with him. And I'll send you a copy of it. Henry Robinson published it, in the paper.

ZR: Oh, wow.

RB: And I ran across it the other day. I did this mass cleaning in my study. And I had told Sarah Weston Hart and Horne that I had it. I said "That's something you probably want to put up in here." And I said, "When I find it, I'm going to have a nice copy made, have it laminated and send it to you." And I just happened to find it the other day. I'll see that you get it. Because it was just what that bear meant.

And, of course, the people that were doing that and stuff, they didn't get it. But the bear was not going to be there. And that bear meant so much to everybody.

You missed this part. The next day after you were with us at the reunion, we had a cookout. Now, I don't understand people having a cookout on the inside. I'm sorry. Cookouts are outside, but that's just me.

But anyway, we were sitting in there and sweating. And the caterers couldn't get in--anyway, they were late with the food. So I have a cousin here who is 81. And she, of course, went to Stephens Lee. She was in the band. So people were just sitting at these tables, waiting for the food. And she started leading cheers. Old cheers. And the place erupted.

ZR: Everybody remembered them?

RB: Yeah. And they were some that I didn't know, because I was on the tail end of it. But we were cutting up and it was such fun. But we did. I don't have no idea what we are going to do tonight. I mean tomorrow night.

ZR: Tomorrow.

RB: We have a cocktail thing at somebody's house tonight. But I have no idea what we're doing tomorrow. But we'll be showing up. My daughter, I told her to come. She's in Atlanta. She said, “I really don't know if I want to be around you people or not.”

[Sorting papers.]

ZR: Would you please let us do this again?

RB: Oh, sure.

ZR: Because I'm going to have to digest this.

RB: I want to write some stuff and send it to you, and, you know, see what you can use and what you can't.

ZR: Okay. We use everything. And some of those photos, the ones that--

RB: Oh, yeah, the ones that you can have. Now, you tell me, because I have the photos. But I just brought it to see if it was something you wanted.

ZR: Well, the next time you come up, if you're here for a weekend, we could scan and give back to you. [Sorted photos.]

RB: And Laura's got, oh, if you could see the books she has. Oh, boy. But when she got, you know, finally retired, that's what she would do. Would sit down and catalog all these pictures. And I mean the albums are like this. And when she passed, Laura had U-Haul. Laura lives in Texas.

ZR: Texas now?

RB: And she took--and it's just within the last four years, Laura has done extensive research. She wants to know about everybody that ever grew a drop of blood of us.

ZR: Well, that's great.

RB: Well, yeah, it is, if you have time to do all that stuff. But she's bugging me. “Okay. Now tell me about this person, tell me about that person. They're distant cousins and I don't know them but you know them because you stayed there.”

Okay. So finally--was it last year? Yeah. last year. I said, “You know what? I'm going to send you a ticket. You need to come.”

ZR: Uh-huh.

RB: So she did.

ZR: Oh.

RB: And she met cousins she had never met. And then she was determined to find Pressley Hendricks Grape. He's in Riverside. And it's unmarked. He did something that made the family mad. So they wouldn't bury him in Violet Hill like everybody else. And maybe that's why he didn't have a marker.

ZR: That's where I want to be buried.

RB: Where? Violet Hill?

ZR: Yeah.

RB: Well, that's where I'm going to be.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Everybody else is out there.

ZR: I love all those souls that are there.

RB: Yeah, I don't want to be where you can't fine me. 'Cause there's a Hendrick Lee plots.

ZR: Oh, yeah?

RB: Uh-huh. And we have a Hendrick Lee and there's a extra--because I told them just cremate me and put me in with my father. But there's an extra grave waiting for me, if I want it.

I don't know if you know if you have ever been to Riverside. It's not an easy place to get around. And the little road is like this. And I have a little car but my goodness. I said, “I am not going any further. I'm not falling over in one of these people's graves.”

ZR: Somebody should be able to tell--

RB: The man was with her. She'd got me through all this mess. But anyway, we did find it.

ZR: Oh, good.

RB: So she wants us--and I don't mind--she wants us to get him a marker. Since we're not going to move him, at least give him a marker.

ZR: [Laughing] You could move him back with the family.

RB: We could do that. Her side and he couldn't come, so, you know, I'm not messing with them.

ZR: Well, if you could let her know that we have absolutely no photographs of Mountain Street School. And if there's any--

RB: The cousin that's here may have some. And I'm going to see her tomorrow.

ZR: Okay.

RB: Because she told me yesterday, she said, “I have a bunch of stuff.” She talked about Pearsons in West Asheville.

ZR: E. W. Pearson?

RB: She's got stuff on them.

ZR: Wow.

RB: And she said, “I'm just going to give it to you, because my daughter's crazy. She don't want this stuff. And you keep up with stuff.” I believe you want to junk up my house. But she said she has stuff for me. But she has pictures of my great-great-grandparents on her wall, her house. And we have the same great-great-grandparents.

ZR: We have a lot of stuff on E. W. Pearson because I think it's his grandson, Clifford, let us borrow it to make scanned copies.

RB: What is his last name?

ZR: I knew you were going to ask that.

RB: It's not Hallum, is it?

ZR: No.

RB: Clifford Cotton?

ZR: Cotton.

RB: I know Clifford Cotton. He was the first Beatnik I ever saw. He was.

ZR: Because he was in a band and--.

RB: No, he was a Beatnik. And he was just like Dobie Gillis. He had a tam. He wore a goatee.

ZR: He's been wonderful with that information. You said Hallum and I meant to ask you. Do you know Cynthia Hallum?

RB: Uh-huh.

ZR: We interviewed her.

RB: Yep.

ZR: And she--I just read the part that she said about she was the first one in her family not to graduate from Stephens Lee.

RB: Probably. Because Cynthia was--

ZR: She was pretty outspoken.

RB: She's the baby.

ZR: Uh-huh, yeah.

RB: Because there was Lee Otis, Jimmy, Clifford, Ann and Cynthia. Ann was a year younger than me. All the rest of them were older than me. And their mom's name was Nanny. Miss Nanny Hallum. And their father's name, I think, was James. He used to work at the A&P. You have no idea what the A&P was. It was a supermarket and right next to it--

ZR: We had it where I grew up. Which guess where it was. Akron.

RB: Oh, really. Oh, my gosh. Well, right next to the A&P was Town House Bakery.

ZR: [Laughing]

RB: I believe they gave birth to Krispy Kreme. And this boy that was in my class, James Scott, used to work at Town House Bakery, and he would call me when they were coming out of the thing. I would go over there when they were hot.

ZR: Glazed?

RB: Yep.

ZR: Did you go to Moore Bakery on Merrimon.

RB: I know where that is. Yeah, because Mom used to get my birthday cakes from there. Yep. I remember Moore's Bakery. We used to walk--see, we lived on Elwood Street before we moved back to Furman. And we used to walk to Giezentanner's.

ZR: Oh, yeah. We ran across that.

RB: And Tastee Freeze was right next door. Yep. I can't believe, my grandmother's little house is still on Elwood Street. I cannot believe that. The other houses were much nicer and they tore them down.

ZR: Depends on where it is.

RB: I know. But really, if I know I'm coming, I will let you know.

ZR: Okay.

RB: I'll send you some stuff when--. I'll just sit down and write it.

END OF INTERVIEW.